Treasures & Trash

Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library

23 January - 23 March, 1984

TREASURES AND TRASH:
ART AND ITS LITERATURE THROUGH THE AGES

An exhibition of curious and serious artistic
literature from the 16th to the 20th centuries
from private collections and those of the
Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library

Selected and organised by Prof. W. McAllister Johnson
Department of Fine Art, University of Toronto

On the occasion of the Annual Meeting of the
College Art Association of America
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With the participation of the
Universities Art Association of Canada

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Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library

University of Toronto

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TREASURES AND TRASH: ART AND ITS LITERATURE THROUGH THE AGES

"One man's trash ... " goes the saying. It has always been so for art and its literature, here seen as a choice of curious and serious titles assembled from private collections and from those of the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library.

Our problem in the mounting of the exhibition lay in the very differences of format -- and of intent -- which art-historical writing has assumed since its origins in the 15th century. How then to respect and illustrate the various branches of knowledge as well as the classic volumes which formed everyone's reference shelf through changing times and needs?

Since one normally would divide the field into three sections --Lives of the Artists, History and Theory of Art, and Architecture -- it was decided, somewhat perversely it is true, not to apply these categories, much less those set up by the classic reference, Julius von Schlosser's Die Kunstliteratur (1924). Architecture, if showy, is too specialised a branch of knowledge to be of general interest, the Lives too repetitive to stimulate thought, and Theory a shade too abstract for other than the concentrated reader. Exhibition of the "great" books within the field, while it might show the results of an enlightened (or unimaginative) acquisitions policy and the purse needed to effect them, could scarcely provide insights into the uses of art literature as opposed to mere bibliography on show. What classifications might then supplant the traditional ones and what might their results be?

It was in the end felt that books, manuscripts and ephemera were able to address the public on their own terms; that the setting up of new and unexpected categories afforded not only the greatest range but the highest possibilities for selection within the limited space available. The rubrics were to be very elastic rather than being used to divide books by genres or the usual categories which effectively prevent one from comprehending their other uses or recessive traits. In this way the same types of objects could be seen and understood in different lights much as we would, in mounting the exhibition, be able to shift volumes from one category to another as space or intellectual whim dictated.

This process has resulted in five large groupings upstairs --

PROVENANCE AND ASSOCIATION
TECHNICAL AND THEORETICAL WORKS
EXHIBITION AND COLLECTION CATALOGUES
TRANSLATIONS AND RE-EDITIONS
CONNOISSEURSHIP AND CRITICISM

and three downstairs --

REFERENCE WORKS AND ALBUMS
FACSIMILES
EPHEMERA AND ERUDITION

all of which cumulatively describe the publication and usage of known and less-known artistic literature.

Even the physical appearance of the exhibits gives some real sense of their place, time and even the vagaries of intellectual production during the great outpouring of artistic literature in the 18th century. Then as now, a great range of perceived and assigned values is evident from their titles and lay-out. For the knowing scholar they are eminently typical of the problems of art history and the literature it generates; this is revealed by their visual impact, whether they are illustrated or not. Catalogue commentary has as a result been restricted to a mention of the place they might occupy on the reference shelf of history.

Many of the exhibited items are not in the standard books of reference because of their anomalous or ephemeral nature; others came to be the preferred editions in the recurrent (and ruthless) competition between scholars, booksellers and bibliophiles. They are also typical of their times or revealing of their successive owners in the manner in which they are bound. What is truly surprising is the number of more modest period statements which have come down to us in their original paper covers, and in good condition.

Beyond this, there are the broad distinctions to be drawn between titles in the publishers' pressboard bindings, full contemporary calf and other bindings for each period; then reliures aux armes and the unusual collectors' bindings intended more for show and as demonstrations of taste, even of personal fantasy. How wrong were the authorities of the British Museum in their Synopsis of the Contents (24th ed., 1826), in maintaining that "the first floor consisting of sixteen rooms, contains the Library of Printed Books. Strangers are not admitted into the apartments, as the mere sight of the outside of books cannot convey either instruction or amusement."

All these books, once they left the presses and were transmitted from owner to owner, have come to be listed in catalogues, removed from more or less dusted shelves and, in everyone's experience, sometimes picked up quite literally from the floor. Their appearance is in many cases quite inconsistent with their worth; whatever the number surviving -- and bibliographers

discover more with each passing day -- their loss has been great in all periods. Also, the major references of the 17th and 18th centuries were used, were thumbed to the point that it is rare to find a fresh copy anywhere; while many a text of questionable worth was sumptuously produced during the 19th century and remains a mute testimony to the deterioration of quality which always parallels a rise in popularity. Whatever its rarity today, and however much we study it as a prime example of the book arts, artistic literature was always meant to be used.

Once the exclusive preserve of historians and practitioners of the arts, not excluding the amateur or dilettante, art literature has become the preserve of the several classes of professionals and publishers who think in terms of large formats and (even larger) press-runs, more illustration and "remaindering the stock" once the season has passed. Few are the eccentric and interesting brochures of our own day, brochures presenting more than information and whose authors are passionately, intimately connected with real artistic issues to the point of sustained polemic. Material study of the design, page lay-out and scholarly apparatus of earlier works brings with it an understanding of a general level of excellence which even today grips our attention.

In like manner, the study of art terminology and more especially of the level of thought and language prevalent in the heroic periods of art history is breath-taking in its implications for the modern scholar. As for the student, he has before him compelling examples of the influence and understanding of art through translation, the creation of lexica and reference books, albums, and even of facsimiles. All these really begin around 1750 and serve as a reminder that the field itself is still relatively young and underdeveloped. Not so young, however, that it has failed to effect an early divorce between Archaeology and Art History, and to have favoured painting at the expense of other arts.

This has led to increased specialization in the literature; in so doing, the continuity and parallelism, even the dialogue between the arts have, it seems, been irrevocably broken. The Outline of Art is but rarely attempted these days. In some ways it remains open only to those having access to great quantities of earlier literature while being sufficiently interested to pursue its highways and side-streets for their own sake.

This type of study leads to the perception of extremes within the literature itself, regardless of period. Early treatises on the arts seem curiously general in nature, lacking in the quantity of specific information we have come to expect since the 19th century. At the other end of the pole, writing on the graphic arts proceeds, with its discussions of paper, water-marks, monograms, repetitions and counterfeits, as if no other world existed; it feeds upon itself, refers to its immediate predecessors through a series of imposing concordances or abbreviations of a nature to try the patience of the most confirmed adept at information science. Discussions of painting tend toward the philosophical, while the decorative arts tend mainly to collection catalogues in the absence of any theoretical literature. One also remarks the difference between catalogues of public and private collections, the latter of which, as Max J. Friedländer once remarked, "are the swan songs, or grave

monuments of the collections" since they are dispersed forthwith. Yet it is the royal and public collections, infinitely more extensive and varied and carrying more authority, upon which earlier standards of judgment were based. The private collection of note in the 18th century was usually worthy of incorporation into a national collection; those of the 19th century are significant in inverse ratio to their owners' pretentions.

What emerges from the literature on display is the constant flux of attributions and provenance, as witnessed by the very amount of literature which art generates. In respect to what was created, the number of works that can be identified at any one time and which lend themselves to discussion are few indeed. Faced with this uncertainty, it is the apparatus of criticism and connoisseurship that permits at least the educated guess, proposes likelihoods, offers documentation likely to be applicable to a category of objects. Even if it is not useful, it exists and is instructive of ambition and the state of knowledge, or of ignorance.

Were one to list only the paintings mentioned in the volumes shown, the chances are that only 5% or so could today be identified, be located in public and private collections. And this is a very liberal estimate indeed. In any event, the annotated sales catalogue tells us more about taste as seen through the art market than any other type of literature. It is, however, virtually impossible to discuss intelligently lots that were withdrawn from sale or whose composition is unknown. Whatever its appearances, scholarly apparatus (the sales or dealer catalogue) is notoriously difficult to use. We learn little from it as to the authenticity of the works of art catalogued since there has always been as much -- or as little -- as one cared to accept within what was known.

In its infinite variety, artistic literature also says much of the topical issues and social customs which have always conditioned those who write, no less than their reading public. We forget, for example, that the teaching of Christian archaeology was normally the preserve of seminarians of the 19th century. On the other hand, everyone in the 18th century wrote verse, and among the most curious and delightful ephemera of the period are surely the Salon critiques in the form of vaudevilles set to traditional airs and hawked at the doors and on the staircase of the Louvre.

But whoever said that art history had always to be serious, much less reverent? Who can forget that a simple handlist of works exhibited or works offered for sale conceals -- and dispenses with -- all the comment, the conversation, even the acculturation through conversation that no one can hope to record; but which just as necessarily fashions the attitudes of the next generation?

The real interest of artistic literature is that it concerns art with all its imponderables and uncertainties. The difficulties today of assembling a proper working library of sources are compounded by runaway prices and the unavailability of a title at a given moment or in a given condition. Nor may the proper description of editions, bindings and condition be taken for granted in a catalogue, when one man's "good" copy is only a working copy to someone else. Perhaps the most demoralising realization for private and institutional

collectors who wish to learn from the literature of art history comes when they discover the market is no longer national but international, and that the narrow (or moneyed) specialist will do anything to secure a title which interests him.

This problematic situation has been somewhat eased in recent years with the appearance of fine facsimile reprints. Rather than laboriously resetting the entire work, as in the 19th century, whole volumes are now done through photomechanical means. These facsimilies, be it said, often exceed the price of originals, but they are easily acquired and one need not fear using them once they are acquired.

The one thing they cannot offer is what is presently exhibited -- the look and feel of the original editions. These defined their generation as surely as modern art publishing does ours. Most of these could be held in one's palm or placed in the pocket; and they were all there was. By engaging the attention of the modern reader or viewer, these books provide ample food for thought.

W. McAllister Johnson

Cover: Design by T. Reid, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library.
After Madeleine de Scudery, Conversations nouvelles sur divers sujets (Paris: Claude Barbin, 1684).

Exhibition: L. Hussel, E. Evans, L. Joy
Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library.

PROVENANCE AND ASSOCIATION (Case One)

Provenance is to art historians what an association copy is to book collectors: a means of tracing ownership. While the latter is determined by such visible things as written or printed ex libris and often recognised by fine or uniform bindings, the former traces historical associations. It establishes dates and special relationships as much or more through the contents of the book or brochure, than through a dedication. Both are a form of special information; both depend upon chance or, if one will, some historical accident for their preservation so that these associations are recognised and transmitted.

Jodelle, Étienne. Le recueil des inscriptions, figures, devises et masquarades ordonnées en l'hostel de ville a Paris. Paris : Wechel, 1558.

David, J.L. Catalogue des tableaux de galerie et de chevalet, dessins, études, livres de croquis. Paris, 1826.

Salon d'Horace Vernet. Paris, 1822.

Diderot, Denis. Essais sur la peinture. Paris : F. Buisson, 1796.

Recueil des choses notables, qui esté faites à Bayonne. Paris : Vascozan, 1566.

Stevens, Arthur. Le salon de 1863. Paris : Librairie centrale, 1866.

Borghini, Raffaello. Il Riposo. Fiorenza : G. Marescotti, 1584.

TECHNICAL AND THEORETICAL WORKS (Case Two and Three)

These two categories are, or should be, inseparable in practice, since they both tend to depend heavily upon illustration, diagrams and comparisons between the abstract and applied arts. Rather than having tipped-in or printed plates as adjuncts to the text, the 17th and 18th centuries reversed our modern expectations through their definition of the livre mixte -- those books for which "prints form the principal part, the discourses which accompany them serving to facilitate their intelligence." Or, one might add, those for which discourse is necessary for the understanding of general principles, whether these be theoretical or practical in nature.

The examples chosen deal with the creation, identification or restoration of art in its broad definition; they also concern the perfection -- and revival -- of specific techniques and problems concerning the display of art works.

Dupin, Baron Charles. Rapport du Jury Central sur les produits de l'industrie française exposés en 1834. Paris : Impr. Royale, 1836.

Dubouloz, A. Petit cours de dessin. Paris [184-]

Papillon, J.M. Traité historique et practique de la gravure en bois. Paris : P.-G. Simon, 1766.

Félibien, André. Des principes de l'architecture, de la sculpture, de la peinture, et des autres arts qui en dépendent. Paris : Veuve et J.B. Coignard, 1699.

Secrets concernant les arts et métiers. Bruxelles : La Compagnie, 1747.

Bosse, A. Sentimens sur la distinction des diverses manières de peinture, dessein & grauere. Paris : L'auteur, 1649.

Menestrier, C.-F. La philosophie des images. Paris : R.J.B. de la Caille, 1682.

Dupain. La science des ombres. Paris : C.-A. Jombert, 1750.

Le Comte, Florent. Cabinet des singularitez d'architecture, peinture, sculpture, et gravure. Paris : N. Le Clerc, E. Picard, 1699-1700.

Mallay, A. Cours élémentaire d'archéologie sacrée. Clermont : Chez l'auteur, 1844.

Buchotte. Les régles du dessein et du lavis. Paris : C.-A. Jombert, 1754.

Bonnardot, Alfred. Essai sur l'art de restaurer les estampes et les livres. Paris : Castel, 1858.

EXHIBITION AND COLLECTION CATALOGUES (Case Four and Five)

These two cases deal with the most common of the catalogue genre, the temporary (loan) and the permanent (usually public) exhibition as seen in a collection catalogue. To these are added the more specialised genres of the dealer and auction catalogues, often annotated, and the occasional special publication serving as a guide to historic ensembles in one place (for example, at Versailles) or within a city or country.

Originally simple listings of names and addresses with some idea of what was to be seen -- or procured for a price -- these all grew in interpretive text and were supplemented or complemented by illustration. The titles shown give a general idea of the evolution of format and degrees of sophistication in a type of artistic literature always of first recourse in art-historical study.

Thomassin, Simon. Recueil des figures, groupes, thermes, vases et autres ornements tels qu'ils se voyent à present dans le Château et Parc de Versailles. Paris : S. Thomassin, 1694.

Rostischen Kunsthandlung, Leipzig. Abgüsse antiker und moderner Statuen, Figuren, Büsten, Basreliefs über die besten Originale geformt. Leipzig, 1794.

Gersaint, E.F. Catalogue raisonné de toutes les pièces qui forment l'oeuvre de Rembrandt. Paris : Hochereal l'ainé, 1751.

Guerin, Nicolas. Description de l'Academie Royale des arts, de peinture et de sculpture. Paris : J. Collombat, 1715.

Mensaert, G.F. Le peintre amateur et curieux. Bruxelles : P. de Bast, 1763.

Monicart, J.B. de. Versailles immortalisé par les merveilles parlantes des batimens, jardins, bosquets, parcs. Paris : E. Ganeau, J. Quillau, 1770.

Notice des principaux tableaux recueillis dans la Lombardie par les Commissaires du gouvernement français. Paris : Impr. des Sciences et Arts, 1798.

Lenoir, Alexandre. Musée des monumens français. Paris : Impr. de Guilleminet, 1800.

Filhol, A.M. Concours décennal. Paris : Gillé fils, 1812.

Landon, C.P. Annales du Musée et de l'Ecole Moderne des Beaux-Arts. Salon de 1808. Paris : Annales du Musée, 1808.

Alinari, V. Églises et couvents de Florence. Firenze : Alinari frères, 1905.

TRANSLATIONS AND RE-EDITIONS (Case Six)

Most historians gravitate to the editio princeps, the first edition which effectively dates a scholarly or literary concern or concept and so begins a stream of similar documentation. That is why they are so hard to find, for when revised editions appeared, the superseded edition often disappeared from the shelves for ever.

Yet the translation or re-edition is precisely what permits the study of the popularity and transmission of thought on the arts: an isolated case is often as indicative of trends as the rapid succession of reprintings or revisions. It is always informative to follow textual modifications from language to language, noting the change in scholarly apparatus, often according to local exigencies or custom. In the process, one discovers the unsung art critics and editors known for the most part only in national context.

French was by far the language most used internationally as the vehicle for artistic expression. This is not surprising as France's institutions were centralised and consolidated by the 18th century and its literature a cosmopolitan one of exceptional richness and texture. Translations and re-editions do occasionally go into English, German and Italian, but the results leave much to be desired as the tradition is lacking.

Reynolds, Sir Joshua. Delle arti del disegno. Firenze, 1778.

Richardson, Jonathan. Traité de la peinture. Amsterdam : H. Uytwerf, 1728.

Bosse, Abraham. De la manière de graver à l'eau forte et au burin. Paris : C.-A. Jombert, 1745.

Dubreuil, Jean. The practice of perspective. London : J. Bowles and C. Bowles, 1765.

Molé, G.F.R. Kritische Anmerkungen über die Fehler der Maler. Leipzig : Dyck, 1772.

Du Fresnoy, C.A. L'art de peinture. Paris : N. L'Anglois, 1668.

Hagedorn, C.L. von. Réflexions sur la peinture. Leipzig : G. Fritsch, 1775.

CONNOISSEURSHIP AND CRITICISM (Case Seven and Eight)

These categories of artistic literature are so closely related as to be inseparable. They deal with questions of attribution and with technical or conceptual quality. This type of literature illustrates to the point of personifying art-historical debates which, like their authors, have defined life-spans. They enable us to examine first-hand the evolution of terminology and of the understanding of style, and they are (or become) period statements on the relative degree of knowledge available on both classic and emergent topics. They are working notes toward the verbalisation of the visual: they may pass into print, but most often remain private documents, sometimes works of art in themselves. Connoisseurship apparatus, however, normally includes all other classifications of literature represented in the exhibition.

Watelet, C.H. L'art de peindre. Paris : H.L. Guerin et L.F. Delatour, 1760.

Connoissance de la mythologie. 4. éd. Paris : E.-F. Savoye, 1753.

Briseaux, D.-E. Traité de beau essentiel dans les arts. Paris : L'auteur/ Chereau, 1752.

David, Louis. Le tableau des Sabines. Paris : Impr. de P. Didot, 1800.

Salon de Mil Huit Cent Vingt-Deux. Paris : Maradon, 1822.

Burtin, F.-X. de. Traité théorétique et practique des connoissances qui sont nécéssaires à tout amateur de tableaux. Bruxelles : Impr. de Weissenbruch, 1808.

Remy, Pierre. Catalogue raisonné des tableaux, desseins & estampes ... de M. de Jullienne. Paris : Chez Vente, 1767.

Haines, F.S. Catalogue of Chinese snuff bottles. MS. 1938.

Resta, Sebastiano. Cento tavole del Codice Resta. Milano : Credito Italiano, 1955.

REFERENCE WORKS AND ALBUMS (East Reading Room, Case One and Two)

For most of the 18th century it was difficult if not impossible to study systematically artistic phenomena owing to the paucity of regularly constituted and disseminated documentation. What some had, others lacked. Such things as biographical data, the artistic output of a painter or engraver or school (and what it looked like), had repeatedly to be searched out, laboriously copied and circulated in manuscripts, and discussed. As early as Vasari (1550), descriptions and discussion were based upon available prints rather than the originals. For the next three centuries scholars assembled their own illustrations to match available texts. In the later 18th century, illustrated and explicated texts -- forerunners of our own encyclopaedias and coffee-table books -- began to appear.

With the creation of public museums such as the Louvre, and their enrichment by foreign conquest or at very least by the concentration of existing national collections, the whole picture of art history was changed. Scholars reacted rapidly in the heady presence of originals of undoubted provenance and authenticity; new artistic personalities became known or were defined; and known ones re-examined, refined.

A new outline of art history was needed, and it could now be effected through easy access and comparison. It was possible for everyone -- at least every major library -- to have the same reference works and commentaries. This assumption remains with us despite the increasing uncertainties of art publishing and the traditionally high prices of such works as the result of illustration and collaborative scholarship.

Heinecken, D.H. von. Dictionnaire des artistes, dont nous avons des estampes. Leipzig : J.G.I. Breitkopf, 1778-90.

Winckelmann, J.J. Histoire de l'art de l'antiquité. Leipzig : Chez l'auteur et chez J.G.I. Breitkopf, 1781.

Mercure de France. Paris : Lacombe, 1769.

Willemin, N.X. Monuments français inédits pour servir à l'histoire des arts. Paris : Chez Mlle. Willemin, 1806-29.

Widener, J.E. French engravings of the eighteenth century in the collection of Joseph Widener. London : Priv. print. at the Chiswick Press, 1923.

Falconnet, E.M. Oeuvres. Lausanne : Société Typographique, 1781.

Watelet, C.H. Encyclopédie méthodique. Beaux-Arts. Paris : Panckoucke, 1788-91.

Wicar, J.B.J. Tableaux, statues, bas-reliefs et camées de la Galerie de Florence. Paris : Lacombe, 1789-1808.

Duchesne, Jean. Voyage d'un iconophile. Paris : Heideloff et Campé, 1834.

FACSIMILES (West Reading Room, Case One)

The facsimile is remarkable for its exactitude in text, illustration or the two combined. Photomechanical processes have since 1960 effected a permanent revolution in artistic literature, making classic works again widely available, and disseminating through fine colour reproduction -- available since the 1920s -- illuminated manuscripts, paintings, master drawings, chiaroscuro woodcuts, and a host of other items offered by subscription which are not always necessary to the discipline although they often become objects of collections -- even of speculation -- if issued in limited and numbered editions.

The problem here is one of selection in essentially commercial ventures. Where up to three facsimiles of early texts may be offered in hardbound or paperback format on different qualities of paper, it is not the text but the production values that differ in intrinsic quality. At the opposite end of the scale, a splendid facsimile is likely to result in institutional purchase only, even then doing some violence to fiscal equilibrium and posing problems of conscience when handing out a considerable sum of money in the face of many and more varied requests. This area, which offers great possibilities for scholarly activity through prefaces, updated catalogues and annotations, is also the least thought out for all its potential.

Salomon, Bernard. Illustrations pour l'Ancien Testament. Genève : Editions de l'Institut d'histoire de l'art du moyen-age, 1969.

Doni, A.F. I marmi. Vinegia : F. Marcolini, 1552.

E.A. Seemann's farbige Gemäldewiedergaben. Leipzig : E.A. Seemann, 1923.

Filhol, A.M. Galerie du Musée Napoléon. Paris : Filhol, 1804.

Maestri veneti del Cinquecento. Firenze : Istituto Alinari, 1980.

EPHEMERA AND ERUDITION (West Reading Room, Case Two)

Time was when there was always a printer or binder down the way who undertook whatever was needed. If one were an engraver, one published one's own sales list which was beautiful as well as informative. The prospectus, illustrated or not, and all the concerns of the moment were given form on paper; they were for the most part scattered or they simply disappeared once their immediate use was past. Many more have been sheltered within cellars and basements until they became important for those who recognised their historical worth.

Ephemera is virtually impossible to collect systematically although great contemporary collections were once constituted, and perhaps still are. Even today, the occasional treasure trove emerges from the most unlikely --and the most obvious -- places. This is a different level of art-historical literature, but perhaps the most appealing in its manifold forms and issues.

Whether as guides for understanding or visiting monuments, government proclamations, satirical brochures issued under fictitious names and places, or the serious, but limited, critical contribution, the role of ephemera in scholarship was long acknowledged and appreciated for what it was; no more. No more, since neither institutions nor individuals are really happy with the small format, while culturally it is lacking the intellectual fibre it once possessed.

The ephemera of art history were current productions, not the precious effusions of Small Book and Private Press lovers and the printers who cater to them. Their loss to the field has been immeasurable, and equally irremediable.

Dejoux. Lettres ... sur la statue colossale du général Desaix. Paris : Impr. de H. Perronneau, 1810.

Fremiet-Monnier. Eloge de M. Devosge. Dijon : Frantin, 1813.

Bibliothèque du Roy, Paris. Catalogue des volumes d'estampes, dont les planches sont à la Bibliothèque du Roy. Paris : Impr. Royale, 1743.

Catalogue par ordre alphabétique, des planches gravées d'après les meilleurs maîtres anciens et modernes ... Paris : Jean, 1801.

Hotel Drouot, Paris. Catalogue des tableaux anciens et modernes ... de M. Th. Bascle. Paris, 1883.

Scève, Maurice. La magnifica et trivmphale entrata del christianiss. re di Francia Henrico ... Lyone : G. Rouillio, 1549.

Cicognara, Leopoldo. Discorsi letti in occasione della pubblica apertura tenuta dalla R. Veneta Accademia de Belle Arti ... Venezia : Tipo. Picotti, 1808.

Sonnenfels, Joseph von. Von dem Verdienste der Portraitmalers ... Vienna : J. Kurzböck, 1768.